

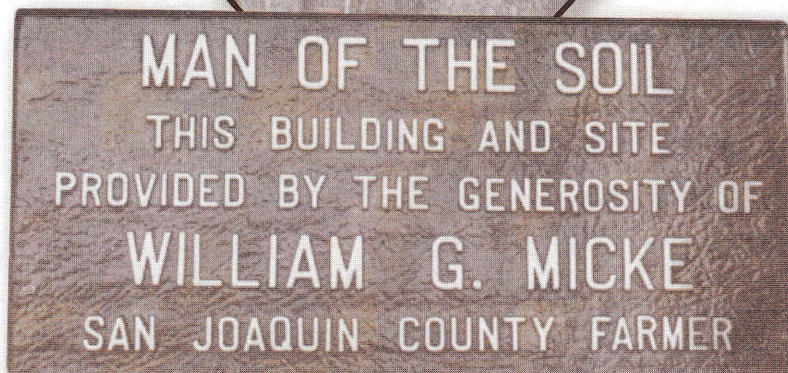
LODI HISTORIAN

WILLIAM GEORGE MICKE

By Nancy Lea Schmer

William "Bill" George Micke came to Lodi in 1902 at the age of twenty-eight. He did ranch work for a year, saving his money. In 1903 he partnered with John Merrill and purchased the old race track ranch at the south-east corner of Cherokee Lane and Lodi Avenue. They plowed up the race track and Micke planted his half of the 56 acre parcel in Tokay grapes, while Merrill planted his in peaches. Micke used cuttings from the Florin area ranch where he had worked the previous five years, and from where he received his first knowledge of grape culture. While Micke's vines were growing, he bought small crops of fruit and grapes and shipped them through the local packing house. That same year, he made his final visit to his family's Missouri farm home where he was born.

Bill Micke started life on February 25, 1874, the eldest of eight children born to Fritz (Fred) and his second wife, the former Minnie Kotwitz. Fritz Micke arrived in the Missouri area from Germany with his family when he was only three years old. Fritz's father purchased a farm



▲ San Joaquin County Historical Museum Plaque. William G. Micke above.

near the town of Woolman in Glasconade County in the eastern portion of the state. Between 1860 and 1870 he built the house where he reared his family. It was constructed out of

sand stone, cut from a quarry on the property. Eventually, it housed Fritz and his wife, their eight children together (Bill, Joe, August, Louis, Otto, Minnie, Martha, and Lydia) and Fritz's three children (Mary, Lena, and Frank) from his previous marriage.

The entire family worked to make a living, raising corn, wheat, oats, watermelons, and sugar cane on their nearly 160 acre farm. In the nearby hills, Bill and his brothers hunted and trapped mink, raccoon, opossum, muskrat, skunk, and fox, adding to the family's income. For their "formal" education, the Micke children walked to the nearby one-room Goerlich Ridge

School. Many years later, as an adult, Bill said he received his education in "the school of hard work." The family attended the Woolman Evangelical Church on Sundays.

As young men, Bill and his brothers spent their summers working the Nebraska grain fields to bring in extra income for the family.

He then moved to Nebraska full time, where he engaged in farming for two years. At the age of twenty-three, Bill Micke decided to go West, buying a train ticket to



▲ Birthplace of Mr. Micke at Woolman, Missouri.

Sacramento. As the train passed through the rich farm land of the valley, he got off the train in Galt. He had three dollars in his pocket and immediately began searching for a job doing the only work he knew, farming. The year was 1897.

He found a job working for a vineyardist in the Florin area, south of Sacramento. Following a year of working for the farmer, he then leased the property for the next four years, paying the owner one-half the profits. He was an ardent learner and studied viticulture so completely that he became a noted expert on the subject in the years to come, using progressive methods to develop his own vineyards.

In 1905, Micke, now having resided in Lodi for three years, built a home on his Cherokee Lane property. In 1908 he purchased Mr. Merrill's interest in the ranch and erected his own packing and shipping shed, not far from his house. He shipped his products under the "Race Track" brand, which became a very popular label in the eastern market, as well as in the west.

On February 17, 1909 William George Micke and Julia Belle Harrison were united in marriage at Micke's Cherokee Lane home. White flowers

and ribbons adorned the parlor, dining room, hall, and stairway. He was thirty-four, she was thirty-one years young. The new Mrs. Micke was the daughter of former Stockton mayor Bruce Harrison and his wife Belle. The Mickes lived in the same house all their lives.

About the time that Bill Micke built his packing and shipping shed, he began a peach and apricot drying

operation. Photos of his drying operations appeared in newspapers and twice on the cover of a statewide journal known as the Pacific Rural Press, later known as The California Farmer.

In 1918 Micke bought 25 acres adjoining his property to the south and another 25 acres to the north in 1919. His vineyards were thriving, and he continued to purchase Tokays on the open market. In 1920 he shipped 100 railroad carloads from his packing house, receiving \$1,000 per acre for his grapes. That same year was when the Mickes purchased what is now known as Micke Grove Park.

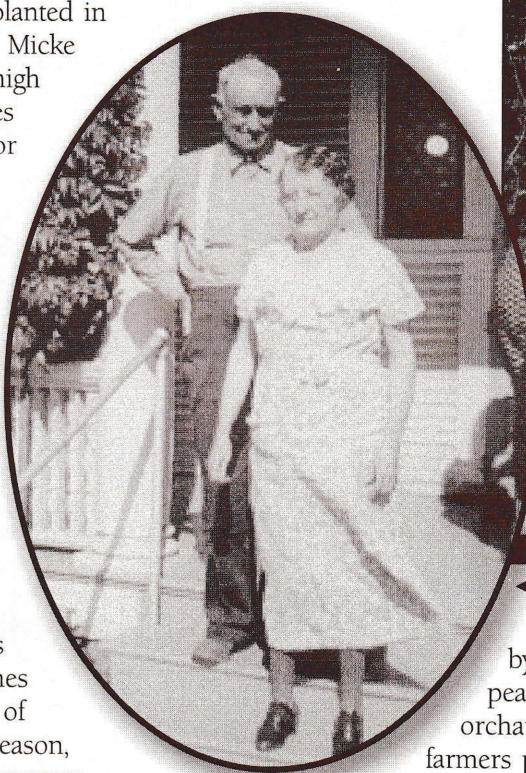
As the story goes, Mr. and Mrs. Micke were driving by in their buggy, and seeing the woodchoppers preparing to chop the trees down, thought they should buy the land and preserve it. "The trees" were a 65 acre grove of natural live and deciduous oak trees located two and a half miles south of Lodi on Armstrong Road, along the Southern Pacific railroad line. The Mickes paid \$140,000 for the entire grain ranch and natural grove, 465 acres in all. The former beet and corn fields were cleared,



▲ Goerlich Ridge School

leveled, and planted in Tokay grapes. Micke believed the high price of grapes would hold for some time. He was right.

His recent land purchase brought Micke's total holdings to approximately 571 acres. By 1922 he was drying more than 300 tons of fresh peaches and 138 tons of apricots per season, selling for an average price of \$500 per ton. Thirty-five women were employed to slice the fresh fruit, pit it, and place it on wide trays, which were then placed in sulphuring houses for four hours. Ten to twelve men worked in the drying yards where the final drying was done. Seasonal crops were grown on the space used for drying during the remainder of the year. But the demand for Tokay grapes continued to grow, the drying yards were gone



◀ W. G. Micke and his wife on front steps of home.

Micke Home in 1905. ▲

by the mid-1940's. The peach and apricot orchards were pulled and farmers planted grape vines in their place.

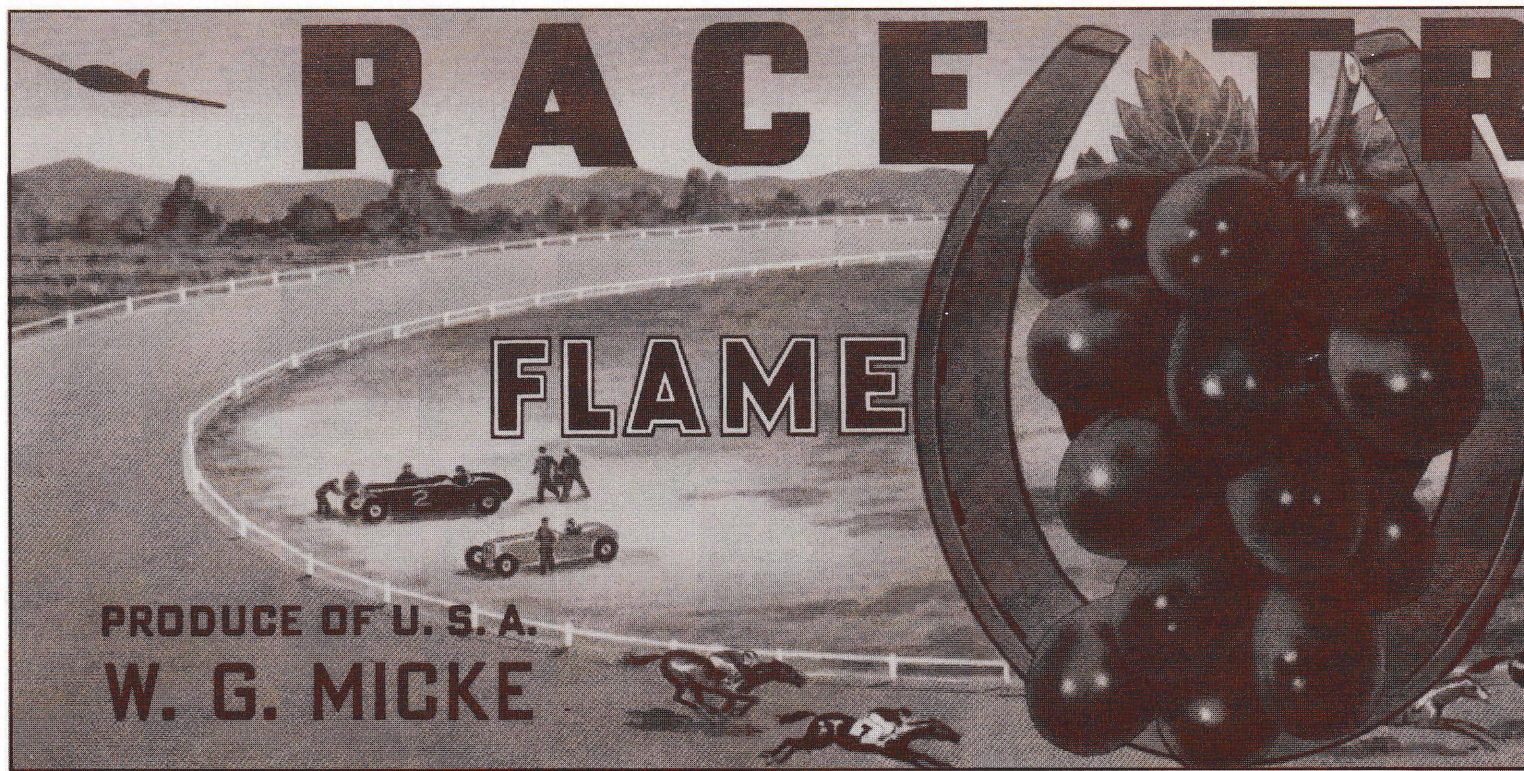
Micke was a meticulous vineyardist. He was one of the earliest to thin his Tokay grapes for a better quality packing bunch. He designed and constructed his own packing crates. None of his boxes were turned down for shipment and whenever the Agriculture Department opened a Micke brand box for inspection, Micke instructed it be packed anew. He always strove for excellence. And he did not want

his brand associated with any inferior products, if his fruit was sharing space in a box car with another farmer's products, he wanted to know whose it was before he'd agree to ok his shipment.

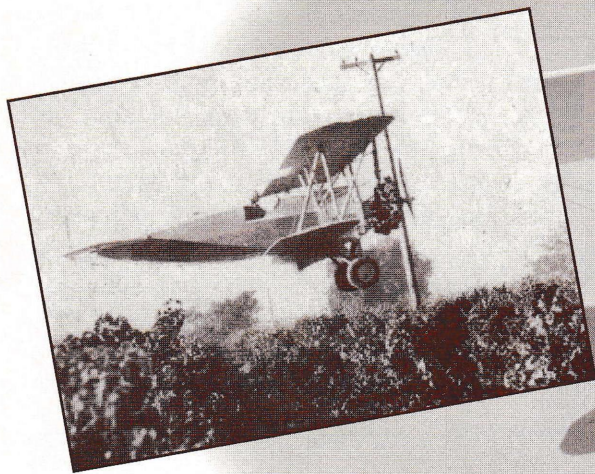
Before farmers hired crop duster pilots, they drove spray rigs up and down the rows to spread sulphur over the vines. Bill Micke was skeptical that airplanes could properly spread the chemical. A true native of Missouri, the "Show Me" state, Micke demanded proof that airplanes could do the job. He crawled under the canopy of leaves near a grapevine in his vineyard and waited for the crop



▲ The Micke home and Packing & Shipping Shed on Cherokee Lane.



▲ William Micke's Race Track label became famous throughout the west and east coasts as a symbol of quality fresh fruits.



A Brief History of Crop

Before farmers started hiring crop dusters, they would drive spray rigs up and down the rows of crops, spraying sulphur over the vines. Tokay growers, as the story goes, did not believe that the planes properly spread the chemical. A true story from the "Show Me" state, Micke demanded that the airplanes could do the job. He covered the canopy of leaves near a grapevine with a net and waited for the crop duster to go by. When the plane passed, Micke crawled out with a net and collected the sulphur dust. He was a h



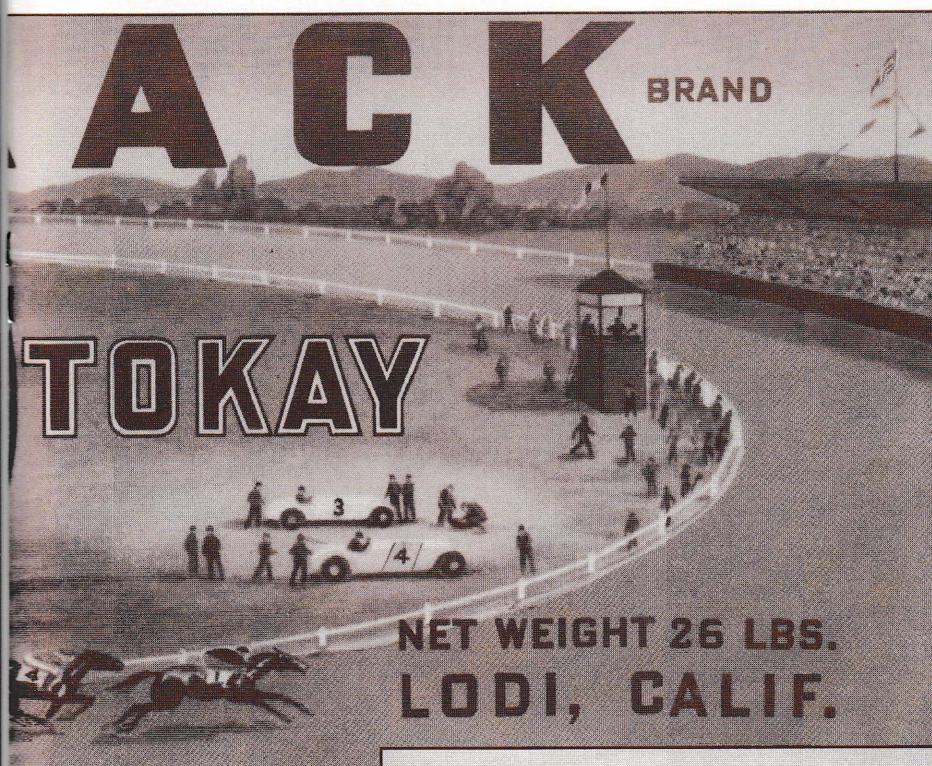
▲ Peach Cutters and Drying Yard.



▲ Grape Picking Crew.



▲ Micke Packing Shed and Crew.



Produce of the Race Track Label Packing Shed, Bill Micke on left. ▲

Dusting

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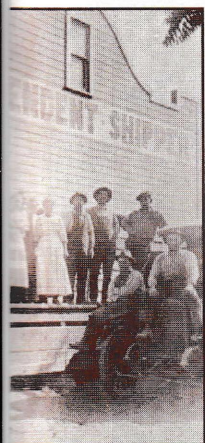
◀ Drying peaches in California.



▲ William G. Micke on right.



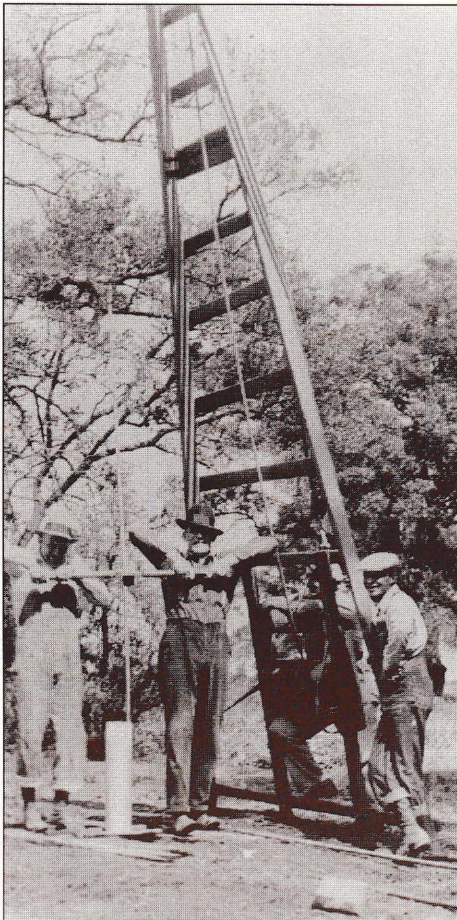
Mr. Micke and Tokay vines. ▲





▲ E. G. Stuckenbruck accepting the deed of Micke Grove on May 8th, 1938. The Grove was given to San Joaquin County by Mr. and Mrs. William G. Micke, and subsequently maintained by the Lodi Post #22 of the American Legion. Left to right: Col. Walter E. Garrison, Gov. Meriman, Mrs. Micke and Mr. Micke, E.G. Stuckenbruck, Al Strange. In background wearing the white shirt is Lou Emmel, N.B.C. artist.

Julia Harrison Micke, 1938.



▲ Micke Grove, 1927. Legionnaires, and policemen Ralph Boyd and Avery White, digging 130-foot well by hand.

duster to zoom overhead. After the plane passed, Micke crawled out and was covered with sulphur dust. He was a believer then.

Meanwhile, the Lodi American Legion post, which established in 1919, became aware that Micke had purchased the Armstrong Road property. The Legion members were especially interested in the grove area, then known as Pixley Grove, as a potential site for their annual picnic. The Legion talked to Micke, well known as a public spirited citizen, about holding their picnic at his grove and he agreed to lease the place to the Post for ten years at a dollar per year if they would clear away the brush, put down a well for water, and run an electric line from Armstrong Road.

In 1927 the Legion members went to work every weekend to clear the poison oak and tangled brush. A 130-foot deep well was dug by hand. They built an open air dance platform, a number of concession stands, and a baseball diamond. In later years, the Legionnaires built a boy scout cabin, lavatories, additional

seating, booths, and roofed the orchestra area.

Micke Grove was approved for a \$88,821 Works Projects Administration grant in September 1938. A four year plan was developed to riprap Pixley Slough, which ran through the park, build roadways with concrete curbs, and install drinking fountains. The oak trees received surgery consisting of chiseling out all the dead wood and filling in with concrete. Trimming was also done on 256 of the 3,200 oak trees, producing 80 cords of wood for the barbeque pits. A caretaker's cottage, wading pool, horseshoe courts, fencing, 5 acres of lawn and landscaping was also completed.

After the American Legion's lease ended, Mr. and Mrs. Micke deeded the entire grove to San Joaquin County. Mr. Micke said, "I made my money here and when I'm through, I'm going to return it. The people of the community have been good to me, and I'm going to be good to them." The dedication ceremonies

were held in conjunction with the Lodi Post's 16th Annual Legion Picnic on May 8, 1938. It was a gala affair, attended by state and local dignitaries including Governor Frank Merriam, Senator Roy Neilson, county Supervisor E.G. Stuckenbruck, and Lodi Post 22 commander Al Strange.

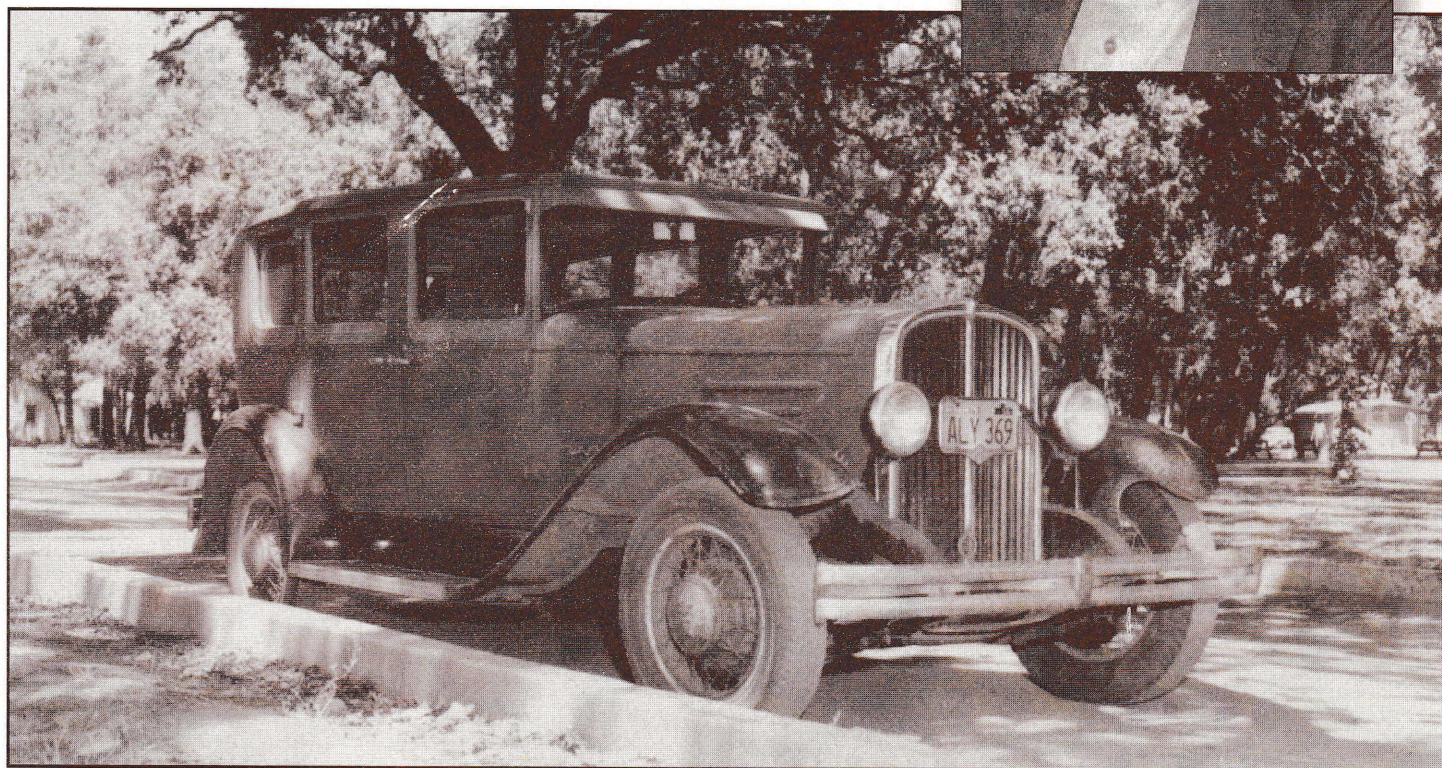
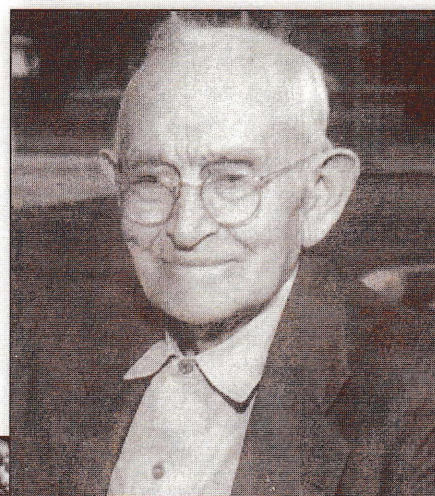
After the grove was under county care, the Mickes still hung onto their dreams for the further development of the park. The childless couple envisioned a recreational spot for all to enjoy. When Mrs. Micke died September 21, 1952, her husband set about making their dreams come true, to honor her memory.

The first memorial was a pool, dedicated August 16, 1953. Micke donated the pool free of cost so that it could be operated on a self supporting basis. The second memorial was a T-shaped activity center, designed so that no trees had to be cut down for its construction. The Julia Harrison Micke Memorial Building was dedicated in 1955 and included a foyer, auditorium, stage, dressing room, meeting room, two kitchens, and a nursery. The small animal zoo was the third, and last,



▲ Lodi Legion cleaning up the brush in Micke Grove, 1927.

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*"A man's word and
 his handshake is a bond."*
 William G. Micke
 1874 ~ 1961
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Up until about 1959, this old Franklin (circa 1928) was a familiar site around Lodi streets with William Micke at the wheel. ▲

memorial to Mrs. Micke. Opened in 1957, it was planned because, as Mr. Micke said, "Kids don't like to see lazy animals that lie around all day and do nothing. They enjoy animals like monkeys which make them laugh."

As long as Bill Micke was able to drive, he visited the men in the vineyard. He would take along a pair of pruning shears and work alongside the men, talking to each individually. His employees were mostly local people and well acquainted with Micke's high standards. In return, Micke appreciated their loyalty and the fact that they came back to work for him year after year. He turned over his vineyard operation to one of his trusted employees in 1955. His ranch foreman drove for him when he decided he could no longer drive, the only other person permitted to get behind the wheel of Micke's 1932 Franklin automobile.

Many Tokay vineyardists, including Micke, needed a place to dispose of the grape strippings, those grapes left on the vine after the crop had been harvested. Micke joined the other farmers who had formed cooperative wineries and took his grapes to these co-ops. In the 1950's Micke had one of the largest accounts at the Cherokee Winery, later known as Montcalm Vintners. He was also a director of the Bank of America Lodi Branch, a post he held from 1929 to his death.

Bill Micke died March 3, 1961 at his home. He was one of Lodi's most prominent, successful grape growers. He lived frugally, yet shared generously. He and his wife were conservationists before it became environmentally popular. This well respected and humble man lived to see the deep appreciation people had for the contribution to the community by he and his beloved wife.

Historian References & Credits:

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San Joaquin County Historical Museum Publication
"William George Micke" compiled by Myrtle Mays
Lodi Historian, Volume 10, Number 5 by Ralph Lea
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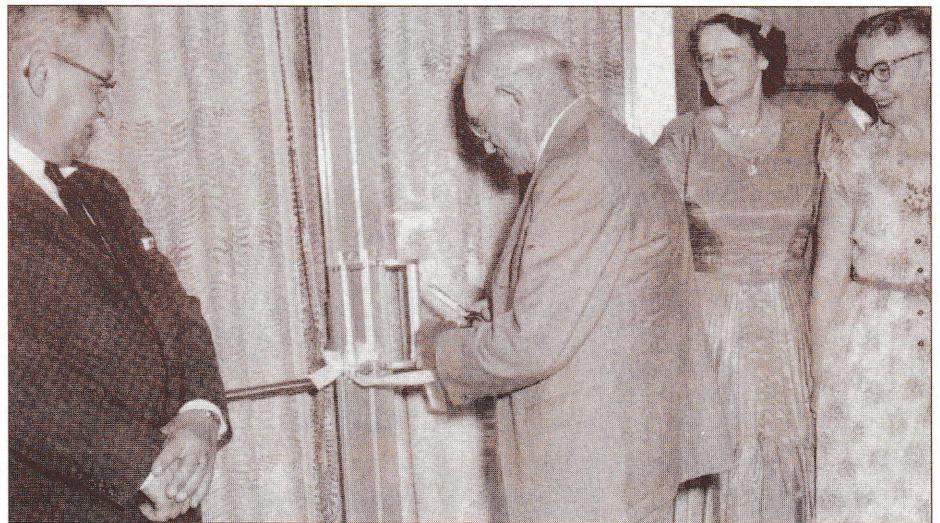
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▲ March 1960; Micke Grove Zoo employee Jim Fahey welcomes two new baby bears.



March 1961; The former home of Mr. and Mrs. William Micke ▲ at 306 S. Cherokee Lane.



▲ June 1955; William Micke cuts the ceremonial ribbon in the new Julia Harrison Micke Memorial Building, a tribute to Mr. Micke's late wife.